

A chance to think big on education

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State lawmakers find themselves knee deep in a bipartisan stew of their own making, and the state Supreme Court is keeping the heat on. It should. Full funding of basic education is a paramount duty of state government under the Washington Constitution, and politicians who get squirmy when they hear the word “tax” must not wriggle off the legal hook.

The House and Senate both have earmarked close to \$1.3 billion more for K-12 schools over the next two years in response to the Supreme Court finding that legislators were in contempt for failing to do more, faster, to meet their legal duty.

But school-funding policy also needs changing. And our preference is that lawmakers — who began a 30-day special legislative session Wednesday — attempt bold changes in the way local schools are paid for. As we’ve argued before, they also need to consider bold changes in the way we raise revenues in a state that relies too much on sales and property taxes.

Late in the regular legislative session that ended April 24, Sen. Bruce Dammeier, R-Puyallup, offered a constructive blueprint for limiting local voters’ subsidies of teacher pay. We applaud Dammeier and his colleagues Rep. Ross Hunter, D-Medina, and Sen. Jim Hargrove, D-Hoquiam, for joining in an effort to find new ways to ensure that school district funding is fair, equal and ample.

But they need to find a major new source of revenue, such as the capital gains tax or even a carbon pollution fee.

The effort also requires what Dammeier is trying to create: a new way of allocating money for schools that removes the incentive — and the legal authority — of local school districts to use voter-approved levies to pay school costs, including teacher pay, that really are a state duty.

Unfortunately, Dammeier’s solution is to use a familiar tax — the property tax — to raise replacement revenues for the local property taxes that his plan would reduce.

Dammeier’s plan has critics and may be hard to sell even to his own Senate Republican Caucus, which has voiced strong opposition to any tax increases. Yet Dammeier’s plan raises taxes by a net \$700 million a year or so once the shift of levies from local to state responsibility takes place in future years.

To sweeten the deal for teachers and some Democrats, Dammeier proposes to have the state offer a health benefit to school employees that is similar to the Public

Employees Benefits Board plans available to state workers, which would increase state outlays and improve coverage for K-12 workers' families.

But he does not call for statewide bargaining with unions, which is a shortcoming. Leaving pay entirely up to the Legislature, which has a record of shortchanging school funding, is an invitation to trouble. Better to grant leverage to teachers through collective bargaining on a statewide, rather than local, basis — much as state workers already do in negotiations with the governor.

Hunter, the House budget chair, also is looking at the levy issue. But Democrats controlling the House are not thrilled by the property tax increases that would land on 40 percent of districts.

Whatever course ultimately is taken, the public gains if lawmakers like Dammeier and Hunter continue to think big, broadly and boldly. It's time to break the logjam on school funding and take meaningful steps toward adequate funding, fair pay and equity between districts.

Major progress needs to be made.

Read more here: http://www.theolympian.com/2015/05/05/3706229_a-chance-to-think-big-on-education.html?rh=1#storylink=cpy